ABSTRACT

The basic question motivating this paper is the question of where we are to go from here. The answer of this question requires reflecting upon the different human possibilities that it is within our power to realize, upon the conditions of their possibility, and upon the ways in which they may variously support or exclude each other. In my opinion, such a reflection upon the human possibilities is necessary, since “where we are to go from here” is a question whose answer is more to be decided than discovered. However, where possibilities are considered in order to decide, choices must be made; this leads us directly to better life theory as social, cultural and critical/normative theory. In this context the problem I would like to consider is whether the notion of self-realization has a future, and whether can play a useful role in “better life theory”.

THE NOTION OF SELF

Different disciplinary cultures inevitably produced different visions about the nature of self. Many thinkers do not prefer to deploy the concept of the self at all, instead of “subject”, “person”, and “individual”. These terminological differences are often seen as theoretically insignificant, though they reflect differences of substance. I think some distinction is surely required.

The concept of “individual” is typically found within liberal discourses, especially among methodological individualists. In its classical formulation, individuals are seen from the outside, as isolated, embodied units, even machines (Hobbes), processors of certain human powers and interests but fundamentally separate from one another and standing in opposition to society. Their subjectivity follows from a common human nature. By the rise of subjectivity in the eighteenth century and ethical, political and aesthetic theories focusing on the inside of the individuals, individuals were defined as possessors of inner depths. The opposition between inside and outside is complemented by a distinction between a higher and lower self. Rousseau, Kant, and later Mill all associate moral and intellectual activities with the control
of a lower, appetitive self associated with desire and the body. The “subject” was defined in opposition to objects, which include nature and society as well as the body and its passions. “Subjectivity means separation from the object realm, yet paradoxically the subject who dominates objects must also exercise control over itself in order to banish its own contingency: the self becomes an object for itself”.¹

Such recognition of human beings both as objects and subjects of knowledge emerges a distinction between self and subject. With taking the self as an object of knowledge, a wideness of discourses from ethics to psychoanalysis arose. These discourses aim to inform the self of its true nature and to prescribe criteria of normality and authenticity. With these discourses speaking from the third-person position of detachment, the self becomes the subject of objective theories operative in the social realm. The self, on the other hand, is their alleged referent, a mystery which each bears within itself and which such discourses attempt to disclose. From this point of view, the subject is irremediably social insofar as it is articulated through public languages. But what of the self? How far do the effects of the social and its discourses reach? From this perspective any discussion must rely on theories of subjectivity. But these theories may be perceived as emancipatory if they help enlighten the self about its true needs and motivations, however they can never fully capture a self that is of an other order. Moreover, there is always the danger that discourses of subjectivity manipulate, or even construct the self of which they speak. Thus, for Foucault, psychoanalysis does not free or enlighten the self, but produces and normalizes it.

Postmodernists avoid such concerns by collapsing the tripartite distinction between individual, subject and self into a single category of subjectivity. Eliminate discourses of subjectivity, and the illusion of an inner, autonomous self, like the quest for individuality, disappears. Selves, in other words, are but special effects, and the question of power arises at the level where they are discursively constructed rather than at the point where the integrity of the self might be threatened.

**THE POSSIBILITY OF SELF-REALIZATION**

The notions of self-realization and self-alienation were firstly appeared in the history of modern philosophy. It has taken as the fundamental theme of the tradition of modern thought, the quality of human life. Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche were among the leading contributors to the debate about this topic that regard in the last century, and spilled over into this one, in such developments as Existentialism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Along with the idea of human nature, the idea of “genuinely/truly/fully human life” has been the